A UTOPIAN VISION OF THE WRITING CENTER: MULTIGENERATIONAL, GENERATIVE, AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY

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While recently reading W. Ross Winterowd's *The English Department: A Personal and Institutional History*, I was pleasantly surprised to see the following paragraph in the Epilogue, where Winterowd describes the ideal reunification of the creative and pragmatic writing arts:

> The Utopian writing program would be a hub-and-spoke operation, a *writing center* being the hub—a site where writers could congregate, talk about their craft, get help with problems, help others solve problems. The center would be a hub for all writers, from "basic" freshmen to upper-division students to faculty members. Genres would include every conceivable kind of writing: research papers, fictional stories, limericks, scientific reports, theses and dissertations, meditations—the sublime and the outrageous. (228-9)

It's a lovely description and I find it worth quoting at length because not only does Winterowd write with clear-eyed prophetic passion, but he also paints a rich description: what would the writing center look like if it were so broadly construed across the seniority of writers, the writing process, and the genres of writing?

In some ways, at my writing center, the University of Texas at Austin's Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC), we have tried to define a broad mission. "Any piece of writing at any stage in the writing process," is one of our catchphrases when introducing the writing center. We tell with pride about those consultations we've held with students working on poems or proposals, and about people who come in just wanting to brainstorm a project. But these are the exceptions, and although our ideals are high, we are far from Winterowd's utopia.

One of the biggest differences between that utopia and our reality is that, in being the *Undergraduate* Writing Center, we do have some institutional stricture on our mission. We serve only undergraduates, primarily because of the immense size of our institution and the presence of a smaller graduate-student writing center elsewhere on campus, both of which are more exception than rule for most writing centers.

But I'm concerned with what these institutional divisions mean in terms of the position of writing in the university; is writing seen as something that only undergraduates do, or else something that only undergraduates would want support doing? Either proposition is unsettling to me. Of course we know that there is a lot of writing going on at the universities at the graduate and professorial level, but much of that writing takes place behind closed office doors. Sometimes there are efforts, maybe within a department, or maybe on an ad hoc basis, to develop a faculty writing groups in all sorts of disciplines (e.g Houfek et al, 2010; Hampton-Farmer et al, 2012; Pasternak, et al 2009) or workshops (Dankowski et al 2012) but these efforts are seldom supported by dedicated staff or faculty members and often proceeded without training in the best practices of peer response.

This doesn't have to be the case. Violet Dutcher conducts a summer faculty writing retreat at Eastern Mennonite University. At the most recent IWCA conference in San Diego, Dutcher, along with Jennifer Faillet, Lunee Lewis Gaillet, Angela Clark-Oates, and Ellen Schendel all presented ideas of how writing centers could support faculty writers. The forthcoming book *Working with Faculty Writers* (2013) includes chapters as revolutionary as "Idea of the Faculty Writing Center" and invokes the "third space" for faculty, not just students. But while I admire the work of these scholars and what it could mean to normalize a social, flexible, process-based faculty writing culture, I can't shake the thought that a *faculty* writing retreat or even a faculty writing center stops short of Winterowd's ideal. Couldn't a writing center be a place where university rank doesn't create a limit for writers and their consultants, but provides additional perspectives? What would it do for writing in all fields if specialists learned to describe their research so clearly that an undergraduate could understand it? What would it mean for graduate or undergraduate consultants to be privy to the writing conventions and practices of expert writers while they are still in process? The prospect of such a center seems almost hyperthermic in its degree of exposure, but a communal writing center hub could be beneficial to all parties. If non-directive, non-evaluative writing feedback is useful for undergrads, why should it stop

being useful once they become graduate students or, for that matter, professors?

The gap between the ideal and reality isn't just about who is at the writing center, but also what is done there. In addition to our reality's insistence that the writing center is a place for undergraduates, we often feel as though the writing center is the place for undergraduates to find out what is *wrong* with their writing. This leads to Winterowd's other visionary description—that the writing center could be a place where getting "help with problems" was just one of many purposes for the center.

Notwithstanding our mantra of "any stage in the writing process," very few writers seem to take us at our word. Almost all of the pieces we see are in a completed, although not perfected, state; despite our best efforts as a discipline, the writing center is still seen as a fix-it shop or an emergency clinic, a place where sick or broken writing is "worked on." Some of the terms used in writing centers still highlight this fact—although there are fewer "labs," many writing centers talk about "student clients," or giving "diagnostic readings" and we at the UWC talk about our "consultants" and "consultees." This language highlights the fact that in practice, writing centers are seen as a step in revision, not a space where writers just, in Winterowd's words, congregate. Stephen North, in the canonical "Idea of a Writing Center," says to an imagined audience of teachers, "You cannot parcel out some portion of a given student for us to deal with ("You take care of editing, I'll deal with invention")" (440). North's example is interesting, not just because it describes how fragmented a part of the writing process "going to the writing center" has become, but also because in his example, the writing center becomes the space for editing, not invention.

Our mission might not be to "fix writing," but when someone walks in our doors, we assume that they have a problem—maybe with brainstorming, maybe with punctuation—and we are going to give them, if not the solutions, then at least the strategies to discover them on their own.

Julie Reid (2008) suggests encouraging more free invention through creating a "playshop" for writers. Her playshop involves such generative work as creating pseudonyms for the day and playing surrealist language games inspired by the Oulipo movement of the sixties as a way to break students into invention. I have to admit, I find the whole thing rather silly and I can't imagine students coming to the writing center to get a day's writing done feeling much fulfilled by activities like "Carnival Ticket Haikus" or "Wheel of Fortune Cookie," but I think that writing centers can bring invention more into their core; I admire Reid's effort to "not critique work, but show students how to generate it. Lots of it" (194). Rather than free-play whimsy, though, I imagine that many working university writers should appreciate the benefits of other alternative resources. Consider the idea of consultants as accountability counselors who could check in with an undergrad working on a term paper just the same as with a professor moving forward on a book. Such special consultants could receive training in the same emotionally responsive and non-directive methods of our regular writing consultants, but instead of trying to intervene in a project, these counselors would encourage the creation of it through setting internal deadlines or daily writing goals with writers and then calling them or meeting with them at the center to discuss the writing process, its difficulties, and ways to continue to generate lots of writing. Our writing center holds a twice-yearly workshop on writers block, which is always well attended, showing that, for many on our campus, the work of writing often begins before writing.

Other ways that writing centers could reposition themselves as places to generate, and not just critique, writing would be to provide spaces and organization for informal workshopping groups. Online forums could unite students, faculty, and community members who all want to write about similar topics, or for similar purposes. Our own Peg Syverson here at UT Austin has suggested that these online writing clearinghouses could bring together writers around topics like environmental design and technology. Such collaborations might bear fruitful cross-disciplinary research as well as provide mentorship opportunities for graduates and undergraduates participating in a common project.

Reimagining the space of writing centers, too, could give them more of a "hub" identity on campus. Instead of the open-air or cubicle design that's made for short consultations to diagnose and prescribe when encountering writing, imagine a writing center with small, reservable cubicles for quiet, focused writing time as well as classrooms or lecture spaces for well-known writers to come and speak "about their craft" to audiences within and beyond the university community.

In Winterowd's ideal, those famous authors wouldn't just be creative writers and those cubicles wouldn't just be filled with the clicks of a computer's keys completing a master's thesis; all types of writing could be encouraged and represented. In our writing center, we're extremely fortunate to have a lot of buy-in from writing intensive classes within the disciplines. We do get biology reports and executive summaries and very, very rarely we see pieces of creative writing,

but, mostly, we get research papers. And almost everything we see is required work. In more than 400 consultations, I have helped with over 80 personal statements and two dozen lab reports, and over a hundred school assignments vaguely described as "essays." But I have a hard time coming up with more than I can count on one hand when remembering the number of consultations I've had a with an undergrad who was writing something without a deadline and without an evaluation.

In Winterowd's ideal, we'd see more work like the comic book one upper-classman was writing to encourage his cousin to stay in school. This student knew his audience and he knew that what he was writing was important, but he didn't need to have a teacher to be there to evaluate his work. It was such an honor to work with a student—no, a writer—who knew that writing could help him accomplish his goals. These self-motivated writers don't have to be entirely altruistic. One spring, a group of young entrepreneurs all entered the writing center together with a proposal in hand that they wanted to pitch at a tech conference here in Austin. The stakes were high and it was personal, but it was not "for credit." Another visitor, an international student from China, brought in an email he was writing to his boss because he wanted to perfect his business English. These types of visitors may not be exactly "sublime and outrageous," but they understand that writing, important writing, takes place all the time, even outside of the formal structure of the university.

These ideals are, of course, only ideals, but they exist to give us something to ponder over and strive for. If the writing center is, after all, only an institution within the university with administrative direction and a budget reflecting priorities, how might we reimagine directions and reformulate priorities to develop a wider view of writing? Because Winterowd's vision isn't just a different type of writing center; it suggests a different philosophy of writing. In this philosophy, all writers and all writing is seen in process, as part of a rich writing world that extends throughout and beyond the university, from within each writer out to each writing community, and permeates the various roles that each person inhabits— friend, activist, student, professional, devotee— and unites them in one critical identity: writer.

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